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Literature and attitudes in public schools perpetuate prejudice against Negro children. A racist society exists in the U.S. Only when this fact is recognized can the problem be resolved.

Literature dealing with Negroes falls predominantly into three categories: stories about famous Negroes; stories of segregated Negro life -- often "quaint" and "humorous"; and stories stressing brotherhood -- often avoiding the objective facts of prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. It is recommended that readers and textbooks depicting real interracial situations and fiction depicting actual problems realistically be used.

The teacher needs to accept whatever children express, but she cannot be detached or uncommitted. A bibliography dealing with racial awareness, ways of handling prejudice, and responsibilities of teachers and parents is included.

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THE AMERICAN NEGRO IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

By JEANNE WALTON

(In answer to many requests this article has been reprinted from the Eliot-Pearson School News, February, 1964. Additional copies are available through the Alumnae Office, Eliot-Pearson School, Tufts University, Medford, Mass. 02155.

Miss Jeanne Walton, whose father and mother were both college graduates, is herself a Negro. She attended N. T. S. from September 1943 to June 1945 and in 1952 did supervised teaching through the School. She holds the B.S. in Ed. degree from Boston University and now teaches in Washington, D. C.)

Mary came home from school on the first day of integrated classes, and her mother asked if she sat beside a Negro child.

Mary replied, "I don't know. I'll look tomorrow."

I have come across this story dozens of times. I have seen it in print and heard it from speakers' platforms. It seems to have happened to some little white Mary in every school that has ever been integrated. I must conclude, from its ubiquity, that this is an American myth and, as such, represents a denial of our guilt and a wish to believe that we have not sown the seeds of racism in our children.

It is interesting that this story is always about a white Mary. The black Mary, evidently, is well aware of the color of the child who sits beside her. As in every myth, there is an element of truth in this one. It is the Negro who must become painfully aware of skin color, and it is the Negro who is still "the invisible man." (See Ellison, Ralph, *The Invisible Man,* Random House, 1952.)

This myth represents the kind of thinking that once characterized our attitude toward sex, namely, "If you don't mention it, the child will never know it exists." Freud helped most of us relinquish this old myth. The writings of Clark, Goodman, and Passamanick and Knobloch provide us with evidence that should make us free ourselves from this new myth.

Before we can begin to answer questions of what books about Negroes we should present to children and how we should deal with these books, we must face some facts.

We live in a racist society. All of us, black and white, have been influenced and molded by that society. Teachers and children alike enter the classroom with already formed attitudes, with experiences to justify the attitudes, with dislikes, with feelings about themselves as white people or as Negroes.

In all other areas teachers realize that they must, themselves, be informed and that they must be aware of children's knowledge and past experience in order to build and implement a curriculum. In all other areas we tackle misconceptions, lack of information, biased attitudes. In the area of race relations we tend to think that we have done our jobs if we establish "democracy in the classroom" and preach brotherhood occasionally. (But don't say too much because the children really don't notice differences, and we don't want to make them conscious of race.)

We give our children readers—and science and mathematics textbooks—that depict only white children. (There have been some new and welcome ventures in this area.) Social studies books mention Negroes and Africans but briefly. African history and the role of the Negro in American history, if dealt with at all, are often discussed in a deprecating manner. Most of the material deals with the slave era.

This very lack of materials tells children about our attitudes. Negroes are not important. They have contributed nothing to the progress of the world. They are not part of "our" history. They were once "our" slaves. Outside of school (and in some cases within) the children may also learn that "they" have "their" neighborhoods and "their" schools and, perhaps, that "they" are trying to get into "our "schools and "our" neighborhoods.

If we are concerned with children's racial ideas we must combat a host of experiences that the children have daily, experiences that tell them over and over that the Negro is inferior. We cannot present literature to children as though they have existed in a vacuum. When we read to them or talk to them, we must deal with those ideas of theirs (and of their parents and their society) that contradict the attitudes that we are trying to develop. We must always remember that children learn, even when they are not "taught."

I once heard a five-year-old white boy say to his Negro classmate, "You can't play because there are no colored cowboys." He had "learned" this from television. Remember that the very absence of Negroes in their lives, in their neighborhoods, on T.V., in books, in movies etc. leads children, white and Negro, to conclude that Negroes are somehow inferior and undesirable.

The literature that we present to children, therefore, and the ways in which we make this presentation must take cognizance of what the children are bringing to the reading. I think that I might categorize literature dealing with Negroes in the following ways.

1. Stories of famous Negroes.
2. Stories of segregated Negro life—often "quaint" and "humorous."
3. Stories stressing brotherhood—sometimes supposedly subtle, sometimes contrived and almost always blind to objective facts of prejudice, discrimination and segregation. (In the past few

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years there have been several exceptions to this rule, and I list these in the bibliography.)

Books in the first category, when well written and when the author has included a wealth of historical material from primary sources, are often very good. It is important, however, that the teacher use the reading of these books as a springboard for discussions. It is very easy for children to have the following attitudes.

1. *Some* Negroes are just as smart as *we* are.
2. White people can be presidents and generals and composers and authors and chairmen of boards; Negroes can only be baseball players and jazz singers.
3. Some Negroes aren't treated so badly. If the others were not so dumb and lazy, they could achieve, too.
4. O. K., so George Washington Carver discovered a lot of things to make out of peanuts—but I want to be an airline pilot, and airlines don't hire Negroes. (At this writing this is true, and the truth should never be denied. This child should be encouraged in his ambition and told that through struggle many doors have opened and are opening.)

Stories of famous Negroes should include not only those who have achieved success within the limitations of a segregated society but also those whose very achievement was the attack they made on that society.

The teacher needs to point out to the class the shameful oppression and discrimination the Negro has endured, to indicate that these famous Negroes had to overcome more obstacles than did their white counterparts, and that were it not for these obstacles they could have contributed even more. I would hope that out of discussions in junior high and high school classes there would come a desire to participate in some way in the freedom struggle, a commitment to action. For unless there is such a commitment, there has really been no teaching. I would hope, too, that there would be a commitment to action on the part of the teacher. I have always been ashamed that teachers and teacher organizations who should be leading the fight for school integration and for better education for deprived youngsters have been (outside of their professional journals) so terribly silent.

The second category of books—those dealing with segregated Negro life—are usually written for younger children. They tend to introduce and perpetuate stereotypes. They present children with a "happy" picture of segregated life with the unstated implication that this is normal and right. I have no objection to a realistic book of segregated life for older children where there can be a discussion of the political, economic and social factors that cause segregation and discrimination. Even here it would be better if the plot of the story involved some kind of conflict or struggle rising out of the handicaps suffered by the characters.

Little Black Sambo is still thought by many to be a good book for little children. I object to it on many grounds. First, the Negro is presented as a comic figure—children are encouraged to laugh at Negroes, and this is often the first response of many children (and adults) on seeing a Negro or a picture of a Negro in any situation. (I am aware that the setting of this book is India, but it is widely assumed to be Africa, and, in any event, the criticisms would still hold.) Many of the other stereotypes about Negroes are here, in addition to the one that Negroes are funny: Negroes love bright colors; Negroes are easily frightened; Negroes eat a lot. Again, Little Black Sambo has all his clothing taken away and is nearly naked. Children (and adults) associate nakedness with sex, and so Sambo is invested with sexuality, one of the supposed exclusive properties of the Negro, as well as with the fear, guilt, shame and fascination we feel about sex. Of course the very title of the book is a color label. Can we conceive of a book entitled *Little White Johnny?* In addition, since the publication of this book, "Sambo" has become a widely used derogatory term for Negro. This last reason, alone, should be sufficient for us not to use the book.

The third category of stories—those that moralize about brotherhood—is often the worst, primarily because many of these stories are dishonest. Here, I believe, are some of the things that should be avoided.

1. The underlying notion that white is right. This appears in such forms as "His skin is brown, but he's white inside" or "You get white milk from a brown-skinned cow." (In passing let us be careful to avoid stories in which black is associated with dirty and white with clean. An example of this, in a book for preschool children, is Margaret Wise Brown's *Two Little Miners.*

2. The story with a too-pat solution, which leaves the reader, white or black, no room in which to explore his own feelings. An example: white boy refuses to play ball when Negro boy joins team. Other white boys say, "Good riddance." Negro boy makes spectacular play, wins game. Bad white boy apologizes, reforms. All live happily ever after.

Children can handle conflict in their stories. Let's give it to them. All of the white boys could do some soul-searching, and the decision, whatever it is, could be a hard one. None of the boys has to be "bad" or "good." Perhaps the Negro youngster, himself, can play a role and not wait by idly while others decide his fate. And must he always be an outstanding player?

The white reader, with some prejudice, cannot identify with the bad white boy. He must repress his feelings and side with the "good guys." We get no insight into the feelings of any of the characters. We are given the idea that the Negro cannot determine his own fate. He must put his trust in the "good guys' " ability to defeat the "bad guys." Children who read and discuss this story will not explore their own feelings or situations. They will give

back the moral. They will know what is expected of them.

3. The preachy, moralizing story which keeps telling us that we should all love one another, that everybody has a contribution to make. These often make such inane comparisons as these: "God made flowers of every color;" "Some people are tall, some are fat, but they're all wonderful."

The problem with which we are contending is not that people *look* different, but that people are *treated* differently on the basis of how they look. We will not achieve good human relationships if we attempt to avoid the central problem.

Other stories that fit loosely into this third category are those with a Negro hero or with some Negro characters where no mention is made of color and the plot of the story does not deal with race. However, in some of these, the reader is supposed to get the idea that race does not matter. The problem is that it does. Many of these stories are good as stories, and beautifully illustrated, but since race is not mentioned *per se* both teachers and children get the idea that you aren't supposed to talk about it. The child will, however, talk about it—but not with the teacher. I have known Negro children in nursery schools who have disliked *Two is a Team,* and I believe that it is partly due to things white children have said to them about the story. I have heard white children say of the scooter race, "I hope the white boy wins!" They also giggle and point and say, "That boy's colored," or, to a Negro child, "That's you." This may be, and often is, at least for the first time, said without malice. However, some Negro children have found it so painful to be black that any calling it to their attention is felt as an attack.

I do not believe that we should avoid stories or discussion because they might be painful to some Negro children. These children can only express and accept their feelings and accept themselves if this painful area is opened up. Of course the teacher will need to be alert and sensitive to children's feelings and aware of what is happening inside and outside the classroom. If children feel free to express themselves in front of the teacher, they are less likely to snicker or tease other children behind the teacher's back. If children are keeping their thoughts and feelings to themselves in order to meet the teacher's standards of brotherhood, we are not achieving good relations. I think, even though it may sound contradictory, that we have to heighten children's awareness of race before we can get them to the point of being unaware. All around them they see and hear "evidence" of the Negro's inferiority. We must help children analyze this "evidence," find the causes for it and, hopefully, do something about changing it. If we try to make children color blind, we only succeed in teaching them to inhibit, to deny and to pretend—in short, to be as dishonest about the problem as we have been.

To create an atmosphere in which awareness can be accepted and fostered, books and pictures are invaluable if they are used as a springboard for discussion. Books dealing with the Negro are becoming better and more abundant. But there is still room for improvement.

I would like to see history and social studies textbooks that truthfully portray the history of man and of the world, not just the white man and "western civilization."

I would like to see readers and science and mathematics textbooks and elementary social studies books that depict children of all colors and classes in situations familiar to many children. I would like to see fiction that presents problems and conflicts—perhaps a story of a Negro child who wished to be white, of a white child whose mother forbade him to bring home his Negro friend, of a Negro child whose father cannot find a job. Let us have endings that are not always so happy. Let us have stories that are not afraid to let children know that there are such things as discrimination, segregation, poverty and injustice.

Generally speaking books for younger children need to be quite free of the defects I have mentioned, because little children cannot be critical of what is read to them or what they read, and it is not easy to give them the kinds of explanations I have suggested here. Older children, however, if properly guided, can read books with some of the faults I spoke of and even books that present a definite race bias. They can learn to analyze these stories, to compare them with other stories they have read, to go back to original sources, to interview people, etc.

I think that the teacher needs to accept whatever children have to express, but she must let children know where she stands. She cannot be detached or uncommitted. If she does not believe in the worth of every human being and in doing all she can to see to it that each child grows up in a society that respects his worth, then she should not be teaching.

Books, alone, will not create good attitudes, good relationships, a good society. But books can be a means through which children and teachers examine themselves and their world and face the problems and contradictions in both.

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